

The Mechanics of Protests

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Social resistance is an important part of modern day politics within democratic countries all over the world. Whether in the form of public protests and demonstrations or online informational posts, social protest aims to not only spread awareness of issues and injustices but to create change as well. Through the discussion of various studies, including "Review: Reflections on 'The Strategy of Social Protest' by William A. Gamson, "Anti-Government Protests in Democracies: A Test of Institutional Explanations" by Yin-Pen Su, and José Medina's book *The Epistemology of Resistance*, an analysis of the nature of protests is provided for the purpose of educating individuals toward a clearer understanding of the social practice. Along with explaining the general importance of protests, I define the significance and utility of protest practices by explaining its role within democracies. In addition, I provide an evaluation of which sociopolitical environments are more or less conducive for the occurrence of protest movements.

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I would also like to thank Gavin for being the role model of achievement I desperately needed.

Process Analysis:

The process which I used to create this research paper was fairly simple and straight forward. I began looking through online databases for quantitative research articles. Specifically, I was looking for articles that dealt with the study or analysis of protests as a general social or political tactic. Ultimately, I gathered a large collection of possible articles that contained key elements in regards to social resistance. In addition to online articles, and the occasional news story, I also reached out to various professors in the Anthropology and Spanish departments with concern to other types of useful information about protests. This led me to finding a couple books on the subject. After I gathered what seemed to be enough information, I began re-reading the articles, stories, and books in order to condense my sources down to the most important and relevant studies and topics. Then, I simply started writing.

If I have learned anything about myself during the time it took to formulate this thesis project, it would most likely be that I am now much more aware of how my writing skills have improved since my first year at this institution. Aside from this, I also become more concerned with where I am headed after undergraduate school. Reading and absorbing countless articles, about social activism and hoe protests have impacted recent social and political events very recently around the world, has done more than just peaked my interest for a time as I wrote the following paper. Researching for this project has also motivated me all the more to become more involved within current social movements. I had studied cultural resistance for a few years, but I had no clear idea of how I, as an individual, could help create an impact. Now I know that it is far easier than one would think.

The Mechanics of Protests

Resistance exists in many forms and through many different mediums. Although the word itself does not inherently express the existence of injustices or oppression, it has become an integral verse among the many battle cries of those who are participating in social protests. In general terms, the goal of a protest is to create change, and for change to occur a resisting force to the current societal structures must take place. Protests are the manifestations of individuals' disapproval of certain existing societal characteristics. Specifically, those social characteristics are ones perceived as sources of inequality or injustice. The term protest is not always used in the context of social or political reformation, and the form in which protests are manifested is not universally defined as one method or another. The manner in which protests take place includes a wide range of defining aspects, from the duration of certain movements to the manner in which their members communicate their ideas. Studies have attempted to categorize the different strategies involved with voicing social resistance. Whether a movement chooses to use tactics such as sit-ins and picket signs, or if a group decides to simply march in solidarity for their cause, when one's goal is to assert into public discourse their desires for change they are considered a protest movement. This essay is not exclusively about the fundamental mechanics that make up the idea of social protests, but in addition it aims to explain various key factors that aid in the production of successful results on behalf of the practice. In discussing the defining traits and strategies of protests this essay makes the claim, in agreement with the main theme of José Medina's book *The Epistemology of Resistance*, that one major factor that stands in the way of successful protests is insensitivity (Medina xi). The book defines insensitivity in this case as "being cognitively and affectively numbed to the lives of others" (xi). This essay's discussion of what constitutes a successful protest will be anchored in this notion, and as a result the

evaluation of successes in regards to public resistance movements is defined by their ability to generate discourse about an issue or injustice. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is somewhat similar to that of social protests. Although this is not in itself a form of resistance, the overall goal is to spread awareness of the importance of protests within any society and to help facilitate educated discussions of the topic.

The Fundamentals of Social Protest

To initiate this discussion of protests, the fundamental definition of this form of discourse is a key piece in gaining a clear understanding of their function and importance. For instance, to protest a given situation does not always constitute social protest. This is to say that while someone may decide to voice their disapproval or disagreement with the ideas of this paper, their protest is not one that can be defined as social protest. Social protests may be characterized as “a form of political expression that seeks to bring about social or political change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public” (McLeod). A noteworthy portion of this definition is the act of influencing other people’s knowledge and decisions. In the context of social protests this action is achieved generally through two categories, covert and overt dissent (McLeod). Covert expressions of dissent that are used by protest movements may include acts such as messages written on picket signs or fliers posted on walls in public places. One example of a recent protest that utilized covert means to spread a message can be found at my own institution, Ball State University. In February of this year the word “RESIST” was spray painted on several walls and buildings around campus (Ohlekamp). Additionally, in a world with almost endless outlets of expression and discourse found online covert forms of dissent such as posting informational articles or tagging individuals on online posts and online fliers is commonly practiced. One recent and unconventional online method that was used to protest the Dakota

Access Pipeline took advantage of the locational settings on Facebook. People from all over the country logged on to their personal Facebook accounts and changed their location status within their personal information. They changed it to say that they were at the protest location of Standing Rock. Such covert acts may seem small, but the goal is simply to influence individuals' knowledge of certain issues. In the case of those who changed their location on Facebook to show support for Standing Rock, the achieved purpose was to unify the movement and to demonstrate each person's participation. This is easily achieved through an online medium. While not all forms of social protest are covert actions, such as the ones listed above, they help circulate information and foster a sense of unity by allowing each individual to feel connected to a larger movement. On the other hand, and by far the most observed form of protest, is the use of overt practices of expressing dissent. This may include marches, or public displays, as well as civil disobedience (McLeod).

One recent overt public demonstration that serves as a prime example of this is the Ni Una Menos marches that have occurred in the capital city of Buenos Aires, in Argentina. The movement came about in protest against the increasing violence between genders, specifically against the killings of wives by their husbands throughout various provinces of the country (Goñi). Public, or overt, protests are characterized by small or large groups joining together in a public space. During the event of these public gatherings a variety of activities may take place depending on the intended tactics of the social movement. For example, they may carry signs, chant slogans, or have public speakers lead an informational session. While not all of these public marches and displays of dissent include the aspect of civil disobedience, it has been a very common practice in the history of protests. The Civil Rights movement during the 1960s provides an excellent example of how this tactic was employed. Participants in the movement

frequently broke laws regarding segregation in a “highly public way” (Gamson 459). While such overt strategies of communicating a desire for political or social change may still be considered nonviolent, it is common for such acts of civil disobedience to be used to gain the attention of those who the protesters wish to influence.

If social protests are characterized by their intent to create political or social change, and if they are no stranger to breaking laws, then where exactly does one draw the line between such a practice and something else like the event of a riot? For instance, if there are forms of dissent that are considered peaceful protests, or movements that exclusively use nonviolent methods, what is there to be said about violent protests? The fact of the matter is that once a social demonstration turns violent they are running a serious risk of hindering their own movement. This is a consequence due to many factors, but to understand why it is a risk for social movements one should take into account the current atmosphere in regards to news and media. Media outlets tend to strive for good stories, and once a protest crosses the line into violent tactics it is almost always met with serious backlash. “The media spotlight – especially television footage and news photos – makes any public encounter between challengers and their antagonists a potentially critical event. It has enormous consequences if the whole world is watching” (Gamson 459). In the modern age of protests and demonstrations, it is impossible to avoid taking into account the movement’s impact on the media. As pointed out by Gamson, interactions between oppositional parties and social movements can be perpetuated throughout news and media forums even without the use of violent protest tactics. Nonetheless, violent strategies tend to, more often than not, have severe drawbacks on social movements and their attempts to influence the public in a positive manner. Gamson writes that violence as a strategy “arises out of impatience and hubris rather than desperation because all else has failed. Further, it

should be thought of as a property of an interaction, not as a conscious strategy of a challenger” (458). Even without a mass media presence which tends to cover the more exciting and interesting stories, such as instances of protests turning violent, crossing the line into such practices alienates the movement from the rest of society. It hurts the movement’s credibility for it displays the resistance movement as unstable and fragmented. To qualify this statement Gamson asserts that while violent tactics should not be used purposefully by protesters, near violent measures are not always out of the question. For example, if conflict escalates between protesters and oppositional parties, the social movement’s message may easily be stamped out by those in power if they do not respond in an equally aggressive way. Gamson describes this situation as “speaking loudly and carrying a small stick” (459). Nonetheless, in the instance that oppositional parties of power decide to respond to protesters through overt violent means, they too run the risk of spurring negative attention towards themselves, thus hurting their own image instead of controlling the dissenters. This should theoretically place both sides on equal grounds as they have to balance their efforts to achieve their goals within the limits of non-violent means; however, this is not always the case. Authority figures have inherent power over public decisions. As a result, while protesters’ use of violence may generally be seen as inexcusable, it is sometimes seen as excusable for those in power when they decide to use such means in response to social movements.

Social protests aim to communicate not just with the public. They are also intending their messages to influence and affect the thoughts of those in power. Therefore, understanding the bodies of power who wield authority is important with regards to understanding protests. John Wilson’s article “Social Protest and Social Control” generally defines who those oppositional parties are within a societal context. Wilson labels them as “agents of social control” (Wilson

471). He further defines them as the individuals or group of individuals who are entrusted by the majority of the public to handle situations of civil disobedience or social disruption. In other words, "officials who exercise an acknowledged authority" (471). This is important because it explains why, to at least to some degree, authority figures are able to employ violent means of dealing with social disruptions. Nonetheless, oppositional parties to social protests are not granted a free pass to use whatever means they deem necessary to handle disruptions in society. A good example of this is the expectation, both legal and societal, that police officers should not use excessive force. This vagueness of the term "excessive" may allow law enforcement to decide what is or is not warranted in certain situations, but at the same time it grants individuals space to challenge officials' decisions if they perceive them to be unjust, or excessive.

While the use of violence is generally discussed in a negative tone, the use of what Gamson classifies as "feistiness" is provided as an alternative tactic for social protests (459). This strategy appears to be synonymous with the tactics of civil disobedience, as described above; however, the term civil disobedience lacks luster when compared to the implied tactics of "feistiness." The line between feisty acts of protest and regular civil disobedience is not clearly defined within Gamson's article, but it is implied that feistiness is an escalated form of civil disobedience. Additionally, it is stated that the use of civil disobedience without the key element of feistiness, violent or otherwise, may perpetuate a "scripted" occurrence of events between protest movements and figures of authority (465). The resulting consequence makes it difficult for the social movement to initiate change. "Far from disrupting the system, the challenger-authority interaction is absorbed into its routine operation" (465). This is significant because it offers the best interpretation of what Gamson implies by the term feistiness. It constitutes whatever acts, generally within the bounds of non-violent methods, which allow a movement to

disrupt society's flow of attention to such a degree that authority figures are forced to take notice. It is important to note that within the use of tactics that purposefully aim to break laws or cause large disruptions within society, social protests are still risking negative outcomes. Just as violent methods of protest run the risk of alienating and obstructing the progress of social movements, so do certain acts of feistiness. To prove this point, take for example Colin Kaepernick's decision to protest police brutality against the black community. Kaepernick's form of protest, kneeling instead of standing during the playing of the national anthem, is far from what Gamson considers a feisty form of social protest. All the same, as an example of a protest tactic that greatly disrupted the attention of society, it fell short of feistiness but was nonetheless met with very mixed reactions.

Aside from the tactics found within the practice of social protests, another fundamental aspect of public protests is the length of time in which social or political movements actively facilitate public demonstrations of resistance. In other words, how often do protest movements last, and how often do certain groups conduct public displays of dissent or civil disobedience? In her article "Micro-Dynamics of Protests," Jung-eun Lee details the results of her study regarding the frequency of public mobilizations in regards to protest movements. She explains that there have been many studies focused on "long-term" and "mid-term" dynamics of social protest, with little focus on a short-term perspective (Lee 399). She states that long-term and mid-term perspectives share similar characteristics with concern to the description of social movements. Both categorize social change within long periods of time, generally years, and characterize those periods with increased instances of protests and of social change as "peak mobilization periods" (399). Within the context of the frequency of protests, Lee explores the relationship between short-term spikes in public protests and the overlying long-term social movements that

may very well influence them. Ultimately, Lee concludes that this is true and that “a protest trajectory is not limited to long-term processes of movement development, but is extendable into shorter waves of mobilizations” (414). This demonstrates that social protests do not require long-term currents to be set in place prior to the mobilization of protests. Nonetheless, Lee does make sure to point out that more often than not short-term waves of protests are anchored within long-term social movements. Thus, she asserts that the “short-term approach compliments the existing longer term approaches” (414).

The Necessity of Protests

The existence of public social dissent is by no means a special case within the defining characteristics of society, especially not within those societies that strive to function under a democratic system. Previous attitudes regarding protests explained them to be “irrational” decisions made by “disgruntled individuals” with the ultimate consequence of hurting democracy (Wallace et al. 433). On the contrary, publicly expressing oppositional viewpoints is an inherent part to democratic processes. Political parties exist as a means to represent differing beliefs found among the public, and they are meant to oppose each other in hopes to hash out solutions to social and political problems. In this day and age protests are commonplace in regards to the political processes within democratic countries. Social protests have become what some consider “politics by other means” (433). Just this year South Korea’s President was impeached, and throughout the process of bringing Park Geun-hye to trial the country witnessed the largest public protests in its history (Sang-hun). Similarly, protests acting as “politics by other means” have recently played extremely significant parts in many Latino American countries. For instance, they have been the major factors fueling the removal of presidents before the end of their terms (Su 149). As a result, social protests are certainly an integral part to modern day

politics within democratic societies. Whether they occur in developing democratic countries or in ones that have already developed their political system, they allow the public to address and evaluate the effectiveness of their political parties and the overall functionality of the political system. For example, in an article by Wallace et al. the question of whether or not social protests generate an attitude of "political efficacy" or one of "political alienation" is posed (Wallace et al. 433). This question places the effects of protests into two outcomes. On one hand, individuals who engage in protest movements may have chosen to do so because they trust that their voices will be heard by their representative parties in the government. In other words, by participating in social protests they are reaffirming their political system and placing their trust in the parties that represent them. This trust is apparent only when the parties effectively listen to the voice of protest. On the other hand, instead of becoming reaffirmed in regards to their political processes, protestors may become aware of the distance between their interests and those of the major political parties. The trust that is otherwise fostered between the social movement and the governing parties is found to be lacking. As a result, a process of negations between the movement and their respective party may take place. Such negations frequently take place through continual exchanges of social protests. Theoretically, in both cases, protests successfully facilitate political discourse and/or changes. While this may not always be the case due to other societal variables that act as oppositional factors against social movements, it still remains true that public protests are now key factors in producing social and political change within democracies.

What Makes a Good Environment for Protests?

To further discuss the role of protests within democratic societies, one question worth posing has to do with which social atmospheres are the most conducive for social protests. Yen-

Pin Su explores a similar idea within the article "Anti-Government Protests in Democracies" by posing the question as to why certain democratic nations, both developed and developing, have more frequent occurrences of social protests than other nations (Su 149). At the center of the article is the idea that individuals only participate in protests or politics when they feel they are able to make an impact on their situation. This goes hand in hand with the covert online methods of protest previously listed, as it explains the notion that movements have a greater chance of gaining active participants if they feel united and involved. In which case, in what societal or political atmospheres do individuals feel propelled to utilize protests as a means of communicating with the rest of the public? In what types of political environments do individuals feel more inclined and capable in regards to mobilizing social protests? Due to the complex nature of this question, as it spans not just studies of social protests but also those of political science, Su narrows the exploration of the topic down to a discussion regarding social dissent as it is influenced by the surrounding system of government. This perspective takes the stance that political institutionalism is a great influence over how protests are created and structured (150). This is to say that if the party system within a democratic country is firmly institutionalized within society and the nation's political operations, then the outcome will lead to fewer protests. The number of social protests occurring would be minimal because the public would feel satisfied and involved by participating in politics alone. In other words, it lessens the need to employ politics of other means because the existing political system functions well enough on its own. On the other hand, "a poorly institutionalized party system 'creates a political vacuum, producing a more conducive environment for greater levels of mobilization'" (150). In contrast, this states that if the political structure is or becomes unstable there will be more involvement in other forms of political expression and negotiation, frequently through protest

movements. In both cases, the political system is proposed as the key factor that influences the existence of said movements. However, Su further explains that the level of “system fragmentation” and its connection to the frequency of protests is not entirely clear (150). In other words, when the party system is not a sufficient outlet for social or political changes it is not always a factor in the mobilization, or lack thereof, of social protests. There are theories claiming that a less institutionalized party system would lead to more “electoral competition” and less social protest movement as there would be more representational parties to choose from (150). Many more variables continually play into charting the influences of politics over protests. For example, the number of “elite allies” of social movements that are found in representative parties has varying effects on individuals’ motivation to mobilize protests (151). In some cases it encourages protests, as they have they have strong supporting figures who back their mobilization efforts. In other scenarios, “the incentives for protest might be reduced because there is a higher probability that the movement's demands can be addressed through institutionalized means” due to their elite representatives (151).

Hand in hand with the evaluation of the key factors that shape protests within democratic nations, the political atmospheric differences between developed countries and those still developing is an important part in the understanding of environments which produce protests. Su makes the claim that within developing countries ties to national political parties are extremely important with concern to the success of protest mobilization (163). The reason for this is best characterized by the countries’ previous political histories. Many developing countries are still considered new democratic nations, and the influences left from previous authoritarian system provide limitations on social protest movements’ efforts to communicate their desires for change (153-54). For one example of this, due to the change in political operations, “protests are less

institutionalized as a conventional form of political participation because of the former authoritarian regime” (154). Su continues to explain how even the use of other official groups, such as unions, are necessary for successful protest movements (154). For the same reason political parties are important for the mobilization of movements, official groups allow a more structured approach to introducing the public to the social tactic of protesting. As a result it creates a more inviting environment for citizens to turn to protesting. While protests may still occur without the support of such groups or institutionalized parties, the influence the movement will ultimately have of social or political changes will be diminished (154). In the case of developed countries, which tend to have more institutionalized party systems already in place, protest movements occur with or without party support. Su asserts that postmaterialism serves as one explanation for why social movements are so frequent even when support from representational parties are lacking, “The core of postmaterialism is the emphasis on self-expression values, such as social tolerance” (153). This is important because it demonstrates how the sole act of expressing one’s ideals is often times a core societal value. Consequently, since protests are a form of expressing ideas and concerns, individuals will feel more involved and interested in movements of social change. In relation to the idea regarding postmaterialism, another aspect that helps explain why protests occur regardless of supporting political parties is the importance placed on social tolerance within developed countries. Su provides an example of non-party affiliated protests against the government in Wisconsin in 2011. It was mobilized by a diverse group of individuals, some of which had no connections to some of the other participating groups (153). This is a significant representation of the importance surrounding social tolerance as it demonstrates the power it has over motivating individuals into action. When individuals believe that their voices make an impact, along with the social belief that the

expression of one's ideas is something that should be allowed and encouraged, protests are more likely to occur.

What If Individuals Still Don't Care?

Apart from all of the complexities surrounding protest tactics, apart from the political and social variables that either limit or magnify the influence of social movements, there is still one more question worth exploring in order to have a clearer understanding of protests. What happens when the timing, environment, and strategies are all perfect yet change remains unachieved? What if the intended target, whether that may be the people, political parties in power, or even the public as a whole, remains uninfluenced and unchanged? The evaluation of what makes a successful protest should be constructed around the intended goal of each individual protest. However, to allow this discussion to encompass all acts of protest, a possible approach to this evaluation is defining successes based upon the overlying goal of any form of social dissent. That overlying and defining goal is to influence the thoughts of others through spreading awareness of social issues and injustices. In which case, in the event that a protest movement sparks any form of discourse about a social topic then the movement would be considered halfway to achieving its purpose. The other aspiration, to influence others and their decisions, comes next. Unfortunately, this second part of a movement's goal may take years to achieve. Also, the fundamental problem on the oppositional side is often times rooted in the epistemic currents of society. In José Medina's *The Epistemology of Resistance*, the difficulties surrounding the implementation of societal change are discussed. Specifically, Medina approaches the topic as an epistemic problem with the cause stemming from insensitivity (Medina xi). One reason why an epistemic perspective is so important is because it expresses the depths to which social change must reach. Medina states that even "maintaining a democratic

temperament is always a struggle, an ongoing struggle that never ends, for our democratic sensibilities always have blind spots we need to be attentive to" (4). If this is the case, then at most protests alone can only succeed to a certain degree before another issue, or blind spot, is brought to light again. This thought also implies the active participation of individuals, and in the case of protests, the active participation of those who are being asked to listen. Such participation is the crucial in order to produce results, and as a result the focus of this problem shifts.

Consequently, bringing about change is no longer about forcing or influencing others to see or change an issue and is more about making it so that they see how they are individually connected to it. This appears to be the only solution in the event that people turn a blind eye even after they are made aware of crucial social issues and injustices. It is that insensitivity which must be continually protested. It is an effort to create a "network of solidarity" within society that will help solve this problem (308). Medina defines this term as something that "is not achieved at the expense of differences, but rather, through relations that preserve differences, that is, through the construction of heterogeneous elements" (308). It may appear that spreading awareness is still only half of what is to be considered a successful strategy toward social change, but this is not true. Through the act of making others aware of their involvement within societal issues, through fostering a network of solidarity, Medina communicates that it will have a lasting affect the future social and political climates of a nation. While Medina does not offer any absolute solutions to the existence of injustices, he does however provide individuals with a better understanding as to what are the key issues and obstacles on the road to achieving social change through resistance. The most important part of Medina's book is that insensitivity is an epistemic issue, meaning it is something that is learned. This provides a hopeful outlook for those actively involved in social protests and other movements. It's hopeful because if an individual's

insensitive characteristics are originally learned, then that signifies that they have the capacity for change through further learning.

Conclusion

The study of protests, their fundamental purpose and their complex mechanics, is one that still provides researchers with many questions. There are no clear cut answers to many of the questions regarding the workings and occurrence of protests. Like many of the researchers utilized within this essay, the paper does not strive to have all of the answers. Due to the integral role that social protests, whether it's being played out through covert or overt means, online or in out in public, the purpose of this work is to inform and to spread awareness. The importance of expressing ideas and concerns, not just with political parties and figures of authority, but also with the rest of the public, is an idea in many nations that has already caused countless changes and social reforms. Protests have aided in the removal of authoritarian figures throughout Latin America, and up to this year it is still a method of achieving change that has helped remove corrupt officials across the globe. The dynamics of social protests vary not just from movement to movement, but also from nation to nation. Nevertheless, protests are a powerful tool for individuals, regardless of the locations and regardless of whether the environment is conducive for them or not. It is a tool that can help spread awareness and combat insensitivity, and it is a practice that is capable of showing others that we are all in this together.

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